



More Costly Than Diamonds

By

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Durand Manor, England. 1195 AD.

Sir John Durand tugged at the reins and slowed his large grey stallion to a canter. For a moment he closed his blue eyes and took a deep breath. The wind carried the scent of distant rain, blossoms and home. It blew over him, encircled and embraced him before it continued its journey down the dusty dirt road. He had feared that he would never smell the late spring air or lay eyes upon the intense green of his land again. Yet here he was, by miracle or God's grace. Five long years had passed since he had ridden through the gates of Durand Manor, five long years since he had left his bride – Alys.

Opening his eyes, he nudged his horse off the road and dismounted. He led Callidus over the wildflower covered grass and towards the fast running stream to drink. Sinking down on the bank, he listened to the solitude of the river. A stillness settled over him as he watched the reeds bend and sway in the breeze. The sound of rushing water filled his ears and in the distance the heavy stone bridge arched over the stream. He had played here as a child with the boys from the village, swimming and sword fighting with sticks. A smile tugged at his mouth as he remembered the innocence of those long gone days.

The more recent years had not been as pleasant. He had followed the Church's command and joined the King's Crusade. And because of it he had seen enough death, sand and blood to last three lifetimes. There had been feats of great bravery, yet as if in counterbalance, acts of

cowardice as well. Some nights the cries of the dead and the blood soaked streets of Acre still invaded his dreams. Yet through those hellish years the thing that would make him push on was the thought of seeing Durand Manor and Alys once more.

He withdrew a thick gold chain from around his neck. At its end dangled an ornate golden ring. Holding it up, he examined it in the bright mid morning sun. The ring was fashioned into a stylized flower and in its centre sat a clear diamond. The sharp facets of the gem caught and flashed with coloured fire in the sunlight. It had cost him a pretty fortune, yet as soon as he saw it he knew it belonged on his bride's hand. He prayed that she was still alive and well – and that no ill had befallen her or the manor in his absence. There had been no word or contact whilst he had been away and part of him was apprehensive about what he would find at Durand Manor. Did she think him dead or would she even be glad that he had returned? Had she longed for him and dreamt of him all these years as he had dreamt of her? Would she even recognize him? For he would know her, as he had committed her image to his heart. He had memorized the fine line of her cheek, the deep russet of her hair and beauty of her clear blue eyes. He wondered if she still cared for him, but sitting on the bank of the stream would not yield him the answers to his questions. Never a coward or one to shy away from duty, Sir John Durand mounted Callidus. He urged the horse back onto the road and with a flick of the reins he began to gallop towards the old stone bridge and an uncertain future.

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Alys leant against the heavy oak door and looked out past the garden, past the stone gates and down the empty road. She lingered in the same spot for several minutes each day. Perhaps it was a foolish ritual but this was where she had last seen her John and somewhere deep inside she

believed that if she watched for him each day... then surely one day he would return. So many years had passed since he had held her in his arms, so many years since she had felt his kiss. Her lips were dry and she wetted them with the tip of her tongue – for a moment trying to remember the sensation of her husband’s lips against hers.

Taking a deep breath, she shook her head at her own folly. Dreaming the day away would not get her work done. There was a manor to run and a hundred things to do. The years since John had left had been challenging, yet even as a new bride she had overseen the strip farming of his holding, had the stable repaired, settled the villagers’ disputes and seen the manor begin to prosper. Yet last winter had been devastating. It was worse than all the previous winters added together. The weather had been bitter and unrelenting. First a storm had damaged the church roof as well as the Durand stable. The heavy rain had turned the roads through the village into muddy quagmires making them inaccessible. Then came the snow that brought more misery. A sickness had spread through the village and carried off eleven of its inhabitants, including old Father Erwan and Peter the Reeve. Alys had feared when her own little son had sickened and for three days she had nursed him, never leaving his side. Her diligence had been rewarded on the fourth morning when Navarre opened his eyes and slowly began to regain his strength.

The winter had been hard but now the spring had come, she hoped that their fortunes would improve. Idly she brushed a speck of dust from her pale blue kirtle and told herself to hurry on with her day – but still she leant against the heavy oak door and stared down the dusty road.

Alys chided herself once more and was turning back into the house when out of the corner of her eye she caught a movement from the road. A horseman rode into view, his dark cloak

flying behind him like a raven's wings. Her stomach clenched in anticipation as she saw that the rider possessed dark blonde hair, it was the colour of honey and amber. Swiftly she walked over the threshold and out into the sunlight, not daring to hope – not daring to breathe. Her eyes rounded in recognition as she watched the large grey stallion ride forward. She knew its markings, it was Callidus and the rider was her husband.

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John's heart beat a little faster as he saw that Durand Manor looked as it always had. As his eyes skimmed over the ivy clad stone walls he felt a sense of pride and relief. To the right of the house he saw the large orchard which was filled with apples, quince and pear. He had thought of his orchard often in his absence. He had missed tending it, walking in it and how the blossom filled branches would quiver in the spring breeze – but most of all he had missed the flavour of the apples. His mouth watered as he thought of biting into one of them. In his opinion, they were the finest in all of Christendom. But the apples were quickly forgotten as he came closer he spied a figure in a blue dress. Instantly he saw the deep russet hair drawn into a long plait and knew it was Alys. He sent up a silent prayer of thanks.

Pulling back on the reins he brought Callidus to a halt. As if sensing his master's impatience, Callidus snorted and pranced for a moment before settling down. John looked up and saw that Alys was hurrying to him, instantly he swung out of the saddle and strode towards her. The sun illuminated her slender form as she lifted her head and smiled. She had not changed in all these years, Alys was still as beautiful as she had been on their last day together.

I cannot make such a boast. John instinctively swept his hand across the right side of his forehead and felt the puckering skin beneath his fingertips. Hesitating, his steps faltered as dark

thoughts flew through his mind. *Will she still want me even with a marred face? Will she still care for me after all this time?*

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Alys stopped in front of her husband. She had thought that he would take her in his arms, yet he had not. A small flare of confusion and fear flickered within her. *Mayhap, he does no longer want me.*

“My Lord, I rejoice at your return.” She said as she dropped into a deep curtsy. “Welcome home husband.”

“My thanks, Lady wife. ‘Tis good to be home – for I feared, that I would never see it ...never see you again.” He said as he reached out his arm and offered her assistance. But she sensed that there was a stiffness in his shoulders, as if he was holding back.

Raising her head, her eyes met his and for a moment she thought she saw apprehension and doubt reflected back. Slowly she stretched out her hand and clasped his. She felt her skin tingle on contact, the years may have been stolen from her but she still reacted to his touch.

“I always believed that you would return to me.” She let him pull her to her feet, but even after he had she did not relinquish his hand.

“You are all kindness, Lady. But as you see, I am much altered.”

“I do not see it.”

His eyes widen in surprise. “How can that be? I am marked for all the world to see.”

Stepping closer Alys almost expected that John would pull away but he did not. Tentatively she raised her hand and touched the scar. It began on the right side of his forehead. The disfigurement skimmed raggedly to the corner of his eye, pinching the skin before it changed direction and disappeared into his hairline.

“Did you think that my love would fade and I would abandon you and your bed because of this little scratch?” She said as she leaned into him and lightly traced the scar with her finger. His warm breath blew against her ear and she swore that it had begun to quicken. Stepping back she scrutinized his face. “Or mayhap you have tired of me and wish to use this tiny cut as an excuse so you can be rid of me for good?”

“Nay Alys, I will never want to be rid of you.” He said as he broke into a smile as he gently drew her into his embrace.

Leaning her head against his broad chest, she wrapped her arms about his waist. For a moment she closed her eyes and revelled in the sensation of being held. She had missed it, she had missed him. She felt his chest go up and down with each breath. There were a thousand things to tell him, beginning with the news of Navarre, the son he had never known. Yet for that instant she was content and stayed silent.

They stood together, enfolded in each other’s arms. The temperate breeze blew through the trees and shook the blossoms from the branches. The petals spiraled and danced upon the gentle wind.

She tilted her chin so she could see his face. “I watched and waited for you each day.”

“For five long years I dreamt and longed for you each and every night.” He answered before he dipped his head and captured her mouth with his own.

His lips were warm and silky and insistent. Her mouth opened to him as does a flower to the sun’s fire. She felt the years of loneliness and hardship dissolve away. John had returned and now they could truly start their lives together. As their kiss deepened, Alys began to feel long forgotten sensations weave and plait through her body. Her heart quickened as tingling heat spread throughout her. She was in danger of being swept away by his kiss; she tightened her arms around his waist and held him close.

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John felt a peace settle over him. Alys still cared for him and accepted him. Her words warmed his heart and her kiss sparked a fire within him. After years of dreaming, somehow he had made it back home to Alys’ embrace. He needed to show her how much she meant to him. Breaking the kiss, he straightened and pulled the chain from around his neck.

“This is for you.” He said as he held the ring before her. The sun caught the pointed facets of the diamond and sparked a rainbow of coloured flashes. “I have carried it for many years, now finally it is where it belongs.”

“It is beautiful.” She said but made no move to take it from him. It was as if the glittering gem held her gaze captive. “It is beautiful but your safe return was all I truly wanted.”

Taking her hand he brought it to his lips before slipping the ring onto her finger. “It is beautiful but you are more so. And I wanted you to know that... that you to me are dear.”

“Then I will treasure it always, as I do your love.” Alys said as she brushed her lips against his.

Leaning his forehead against hers, a smile tugged at his lips. “Say the words, Alys. I’ve waited so many years to hear you say them to me once more.”

“I love you John – with all that I am.”

He leaned in to kiss her once more when the sound of a child laughing snared his attention. Giving Alys a questioning look he waited for an explanation. With a bright smile she took his hand and tugged him towards the open door of Durand Manor.

“Come John, it is time that you met Navarre.”

“Navarre?”

“Our son.”

The words were barely from her lips when John, laughing with delight, caught his wife around the waist and swung her about in a circle in the petal filled air.

The End